

Q: Good afternoon. Today is September 1st, 2016. My name is Kim Hewitt and I am here at the Newton City Hall with Frank Tobin. Together we're participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So, Frank, can you tell us what is your connection to Newton?

A: Well, I moved here in 1951 from Randolph and I went into the service in '63 and back in '67 was here for about a year and a half. Then I moved away and was gone for about 30 years, and then I came back.

Q: So what were you doing before you entered the service?

A: Not too much of anything. I had graduated in '61 from Newton High School, and at that time I tried college, I had a few jobs. I wasn't really doing much of anything.

Q: So what did you miss most about home, aside from family and friends, while you were away?

A: Well, other than family and friends, I missed the amenities, such as fresh milk, things of that nature. You miss--you don't have any solitude. You're always mixed in with other people. There is no, very little time to be by yourself.

Q: So, how did you join and why did you choose the specific branch you were in?

A: Well, originally I applied to the Coast Guard, but they told me in 1963 they had a waiting list, so I went to the Air Force, applied, and actually I was rejected for the--I was considered what they called 4A. 4A at that time was a classification that you were borderline, physically. And the reason I was borderline physically is because I have the worst flat feet you can get, and they said, "We're not taking flat feet right now, but you've taken the physical, it's on record. They could change tomorrow and say we want 4As and you could be called up, and you would be called up by the Army," which at that time had a draft. The Air Force did not. The Air Force didn't draft.

So, I said, “Well, okay, I’ll go in anyway, I mean, if you want.” And they said, “If you want to go in we’ll change it.” And I said, “Yeah go ahead and change it.” So I went into the Air Force, because I was hoping to get some sort of a trade maybe, or an occupation out of it. It was a four year enlistment and it wasn’t as hard as the Marines or the Army.

Q: Did you get a trade out of it?

A: Not really, no. I was put in Air Force Intelligence, and that is where I ended up for four years.

Q: Okay. So, how did you adapt to military life?

A: Well, I was fortunate. I had very, I spent about the first six months in Texas going to Basic Training and to Tech School. Then I went into a small Air Force base in Indiana and it was very, very good duty. I had good people around me, good Officers, good people of my rank, and good enlisted people, so I adapted quite well.

Q: How did you stay in touch with family and friends while you were--

A: In the service?

Q: Yes.

A: Oh, most of it was done by letters. Obviously they don’t have the communications that they have today. And even for my parents to call me it was difficult, because you had to call the base, you had to know which unit I was in, then they had--hopefully I was there or someplace, and it was much harder than it is today. So it was mostly by letters.

Q: Where exactly did you serve? And do you remember arriving and what it was like?

A: Yeah, where did I serve the whole four years?

Q: Yeah, if you can go through.

A: Okay. Originally I went to Basic Training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. I was there for about eight or 10 weeks. And then I went to the Tech School in North Texas. What was the name? It was called Shepherd Air Force Base way up in the panhandle. I can't remember the name of the city, Amarillo maybe. I can't remember. And I was up there for maybe two months for Tech School. Then I went to Bunker Hill Air Force Base in Indiana and I was there for just about two and a half years in central Indiana. And then I went to Vietnam and I was there in Vietnam for just about a year. And then in Vietnam I was stationed for two months or so, roughly two months down in the Mekong Delta, and then I spent probably about nine or 10 months at Air Force Headquarters in Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, whatever you want to call it.

Q: Can you tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences?

A: Well, some were funny, some weren't. Some of the funny ones are--You want funny ones?

Q: We want both, but whatever you're comfortable sharing.

A: At our compound down in the Mekong Delta we had an area where we threw all our trash, and occasionally some Vietnamese people would come by, and they would pick through and take what they want, and they would burn the rest. Well, one night sometime in the middle of the night we hear the screaming and all of a sudden the rifle starts firing and everything, and everybody jumps up, grabs their rifle, runs out. And what happened was, some guy went out to empty his trash and there was a boa constrictor out there in the trash looking for, I guess, something to eat or whatever you want to call it, and I guess he darn near stepped on it, and he grabbed his rifle, and he didn't kill it, he pulverized it. And I mean it was funny afterwards, but for the first few minutes it wasn't funny, especially to this guy.

Worst moment: I don't know if there was exactly a worst moment. I only fired my gun once in anger. We got attacked and the Viet Cong were in the woods, yelling and screaming and taunting us, and I fired into the woods, emptied a clip. And I don't know if I hit anybody or not, and quite honestly I don't care. If God tells me, "You killed 20 of 'em" I'd say, "Great." I have no issues about that at all, because they're trying to kill me, so I'm going to kill them first. And if I thought for a while I could probably tell you some other funny stories. Maybe I'll think of one.

Q: Yeah, I can ask you again at the end, sure. So, do you recall the day your service ended?

A: Yes. I was discharged at Travis Air Force Base in California, and of course on the last day you have to process out and go through all the steps and everything like that. And it was a little bit unique, because after four years it's going to take a little bit of mental adjustment, but I adjusted quite well. The best adjustment I ever had is I was fortunate enough to come back from Vietnam on a Pan Am flight, a commercial airliner, because of my job in Intelligence, and when we landed at San Francisco International Airport, still no big issues, nothing, and I walked off the plane, walked down the concourse, and there was a snack bar, and I walked up to him and I said, "I want the tallest, coldest glass of fresh milk you have." And he gave me one in an ice cream soda glass or something, and I drank it down, because we had nothing but powdered milk. And after I drank that down I just said, "Now I'm home."

Q: So you sort of spoke to that, but what was it like to return to civilian life kind of long term?

A: No problem. I adapted instantly. I had no issues. I have no PTSD, nothing like that. I have no regrets on anything I did. No regrets on anything, no hang-ups, nothing. Perfectly well adjusted.

Q: Is there anything you can share about what your service was like with Intelligence?

A: Well, I was in Intelligence Unit when I was in Indiana. I worked at a SAC Base, and SAC at the time was Strategic Air Command, and that was the bomber part of the Air Force, and we had B-58 bombers there, and I was in charge. We had 20 bombers and 20 air refueling tankers. And I was in charge, or I won't say in charge, I worked on the war plan for nuclear missions, and I had access to all the material, I knew everybody was going, what they were going to do, what the call signs, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, everything about it. And I had what they called a Top Secret ESI Clearance, and the ESI stood for Extremely Sensitive Information. But that is mostly what I did.

When I went to Vietnam I actually helped draw up charts and maps that we used in a lot of briefings, and we would get messages coming down from Washington saying, "Do not bomb in this certain area until further notice." And I would have to plot out the coordinates and put tapes or a line or draw something so when people got briefed, many times they used my maps, and so that is mostly what I did, that type of stuff.

Q: Okay. So, how did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: Wonderful. I think the service did a lot for me. I think it--I won't say helped me find myself, but I enjoyed the four years that I was in. I think every person mandatory should go in for two years, mandatory, or those who can't do it physically or they want to be a conscientious objector, well that's fine, but they can do some sort of public service for two years. And I was, as I said, I was very lucky with the people that I worked with for four years, and as for my experience in Vietnam, is that what you asked me?

Q: Yes.

A: What was the question again? Repeat it?

Q: About how service and your experiences affected your life and your outlook on military and the war in general, so not just in Vietnam but any of the--discipline maybe, that kind of stuff.

A: The discipline was fine. I mean I was probably somewhat average. Once in a great while I would screw up and I would get chewed out, and deservedly so, so I had no issues with that. And as for the military itself as a whole, I'm all in favor of it. Remember the first thing the Continental Congress did in 1780 or whenever it was was they formed a Navy to protect the shores. That was the number one thing that they did. So, as for the military I think it's a great thing. And you asked me about my outlook on Vietnam, is that what you--

Q: Your outlook on war and military in general.

A: I think my outlook on war is very simple: Kill them before they kill us. And with the situation we have in the world today we go to them. Don't wait until they blow up a building here or a nightclub or something like that. You go to them. No prisoners, just like what they did to Bin Laden, no prisoners, just leave them there, and because that is the only thing they understand is force. They laugh at us with our laws, because they know they come over here, they get arrested, they're going to go to get jail, they're going to get food, clothing, medical care. They laugh at us. And they capture one of ours and what do they do, they cut his head off. So, you go to them. I'm 110% in favor of that. And if other people get killed, tough.

Q: So, what would you like people to know a hundred years from now?

A: About?

Q: Anything.

A: I would say, a hundred years from now, I think you're all probably too young to remember that era of the Vietnam War. It divided the country and it brought down, well indirectly brought

down a President. The thing was about the Vietnam War, the big tragedy was we were there, I believe, for a noble cause, but the war was being fought from Washington D.C. It wasn't being fought in Vietnam, because the people in Washington tried to run the war, they didn't let the Generals do what Generals do. And that's why it continued on for as long as it did, because they fought, in Vietnam people fought with one hand behind their back, because of all these people in Washington D.C. trying to run this war.

Now, I was in Air Force Intelligence at Air Force Headquarters. I know what I'm talking about. It's not just an opinion. I can state for a fact that happened. And I guess around 57,000 Americans died, and god knows how many other people got killed. But the thing you have to remember that nobody ever says about Vietnam is when they see those movies of the helicopter coming in on top of the building and excavating, people think, "Oh we got run out of Vietnam," and that's a lie. That's not what happened. What happened was those movies you see where the helicopters come in and land on the--that happened two years after the end of the war. That happened in 1975. The war ended supposedly in '73. And there are certain people that want you to believe this, we were thrown out of Vietnam militarily. Not true.

In 1975, or in '73 when the North Vietnamese signed a treaty, they promised not to invade South Vietnam and they lied through their teeth, because not six months later they were invading South Vietnam. They broke the peace. And as far as I'm concerned, they're lying little people. They're the ones, but you don't hear about this, because certain political affiliations or whatever want you to believe otherwise. But those are the facts. That is exactly what happened. 1975, they finally took over South Vietnam.

Q: So, I wanted to come back to the question we had asked you before. Is there anything else that you really felt was a memorable experience that you might have thought of to share?

A: Well, there is a lot of small experiences. On the way over here I tried to think of some things, and I said, "Well, nobody is interested in that and that's not important," this type of thing. I had a

lot of funny little things happen. I had some things happen that weren't funny, but when you throw them all into a pot and you mix it all up, my experience in the military was very good. I was very proud that I spent four years in the Air Force. And there is a saying that you may have heard before that I wouldn't do it again for a million dollars, but I wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience.

It takes people, it takes a young man or a young woman and it builds them, because when you go into Basic Training, you hear these stories about, "Drop down and give me 10 push-ups" or "Hurry up and wait. We're going to run everywhere." Then you stop and you wait 20 minutes and all those things, and there is a purpose to all that. I mean it doesn't seem like it initially, but the purpose is to get you to act as a unit when you're in Basic Training. They want to strip you down from your civilian life, make you part of the military, and build you as a unit.

You have to get accustomed to taking orders. If he says, "Give me 10 push-ups" you give him 10 push-ups; you don't question it. The only question you can really question in the military is if you feel it's immoral, that you can question, and you have a right to refuse an immoral offer or order, rather.

So, no, I had a good time in the military overall, but again I'll say everybody should be forced to go in. There should be a draft and there should be some exceptions. I go along with that. But we would have an awful lot less problems when people--when people come out of the military most of them are in much better shape mentally and physically than before they went in. So, my experience was very positive.

Q: Do you want to share some of the stories you were thinking of on the way over?

A: We had, when I was in Intelligence in Vietnam we were supposed to pick up a confidential informant, and he was going to meet us at a certain crossroad at noon time in Laos. So, I get in the helicopter and off we went, and we flew for maybe an hour, and the pilot says, "Okay, this

should be it down here.” We looked down there and there is like a horse cart down there with a donkey or a horse, and there is a guy standing there. So, we come in low, we landed at the, on the dirt road. I run over, “Come on, let’s go” and I grab him by the shirt, “Let’s go.” And he is [babbling], threw him in the helicopter, and we take off. And we found out later it was the wrong guy. This poor schmuck would just happen to be standing there at that time. So, we chipped in and gave him \$50 bucks and brought him back. I think he would have said, give him \$50 bucks, I think he would have said, “Come back tomorrow. I’ll be here. Let’s do this again. I’ll do this every day for \$50 bucks.” That was a lot of money, especially over there with these people, that was probably at least a month’s pay to these people.

I once stopped a Brigadier General. And here I am, I’ve got two stripes on my shoulder, and I worked in Indiana in a very restricted area, and you had to have what we called a line badge, and the line badge had to say you had access to this area. And a Brigadier General came in and he was with some other Officers, and the other Officers were showing the Brigadier General around, and they were going to take him back into the area where the war plans are. And I think, “Well, I know this is wrong. He can’t, he is not supposed to go back there, but he is with these other two Officers.” But for some reason I stepped in front of them and I said, “Excuse me, Sir. You can’t go back there unless you have a special pass.” And the General looked at me, and I’m sweating bullets. I just told a Brigadier General he can’t do something. And he looked at me and he says, “Thank you, Airman.” And he turned around and walked away.

And I went over and sat down, and if I had a bottle of bourbon I’m sure I would have taken a shot of it at least after telling a Brigadier General he can’t go somewhere. But you had to have that pass. And like they say, need to know, if you don’t need to know something, no matter what your classification is and security, you don’t get to see it, because it doesn’t concern you.

We had an intruder one time who came in with no line badge, no pass, and I spread eagled him up against the wall, and this was again in Indiana in our restricted area, and had a pistol on him and pressed the alarm. And I says, he had Lieutenant bars on his shoulder, Second Lieutenant,

and I said, "Don't resist the Air Police when they come out. Don't try and explain anything. Just let them pick you up and take you out, because if you resist they're going to beat the hell out of you." So they come rushing in with their guns drawn and everything, and I just pointed, and they grabbed this guy, took him outside, threw him on the ground, and wanted to know what was going on. And I never heard for sure, but I think it was a security test, that's what I think, because I never heard more about it. I think it was just some, probably some Air Police guy that said, "Let's go test this." They gave him a flight suit with the Lieutenant bars on it or something and said, "Go wander around and see how long it is before somebody takes notice that you are not supposed to be here."

So, I'm very proud of my four years in the Air Force. I thought about staying in the Air Force. I thought about reenlisting. Oh, one interesting story, one more. This one is a good one. When I was about a month before I left Vietnam, one of the Officers come down to me at my desk and he says, "Frank, go down to this room down the hall. There is two guys that want to talk to you." Not two Officers, two guys. So I went down there, went in the room. They introduced themselves as Bill and Joe or something, and they said, "We would like to hire you." "What for?" And they says, "We want you to go to work for us. We work for Air America. And we need you because you've got a good security clearance, you've got a good record in the military." And I says, "Well what's the deal?" And he says, "Well," he says, "first of all, the pay is \$25,000 a year." Now, that is like a hundred thousand today. So, I says, "Okay, you got my interest."

Remember, at that time I don't think I was making \$5,000 a year. And I said, "Well okay, I'm interested. What am I going to be doing?" He says, "I can't tell you." I says, "Well, wait a minute." He says, "Don't worry. It's nothing bad." I says, "Okay." And I says, "Well, I've been gone for a year. I want to go home and see my family. Come back in 30 days and you've got a deal." He says, "We need you right now." And I said, "Well, I've got to go back to California to get discharged." "We'll take care of that here." He says, "We can have you discharged tomorrow

if you want.” So I said, “No, I think I’ll pass. I really want to go home. I’ve been here for a year.”

Well, I found out later that Air America at the time was a front for the CIA, and Air America would do a lot of things in Southeast Asia under the Air America. They actually had a freight company, Air America, but again it was a front for the CIA. So, I turned them down, and of course that would have been a life-changing experience. Who knows what would have happened. Not reenlisting was, I guess, life-changing in a sense. But I was just unsure about reenlisting. I wasn’t 100% sold on it. I was maybe 50% sold. So I said, “Well, at least if worst comes to worst you can always go back in after a few months or something like that.”

So, I had some interesting experiences, but as I said I only fired my gun in anger once, and other than that I adjusted very well when I came home, I had no problems getting back into society. I never had any issues with people getting deferments to go to college, anything like that. That didn’t bother me. What bothered me at the time and still does are the people that went to Canada. Those are the ones that bothered me. You want a deferment because you’re going to college, okay that’s fine, no problem. So, to me they were just cowards. And you remember Mohammad Ali who just died a few months ago, and he was Cassius Clay back in those days, and he didn’t go in the military, because he didn’t believe in killing people or violence, but what was his job. Boxers do kill people. It does happen. And I know you’ve all heard of Elvis Presley. Here it’s 1958. Elvis Presley is at the top of his career, the peak of his career. He gets drafted. He goes in. He says, “I’m going to do my duty.” He went in. He got drafted. He went in for two years. I mean that, say good or bad things about somebody, let’s say Elvis, he went in. He didn’t, he could have easily bought his way out of it or whatever, but he made no issues. So, what other questions do you have?

Q: What did you do after the service?

A: After the service, what did I do? I had, I worked at one small job, and then I was recruited by an air tool company to go to work as a salesman and travel, and I turned them down once, because I said, "I couldn't sell warm blankets to an Eskimo." So, he come back again a couple of months later and he says, "Well, at least try it." He says, "We'll give you a company car, an expense account. Do some traveling." And I says, "Okay." So, I went ahead and tried it, and it turns out I liked it. I believed in the product, I liked it, this type of thing.

At the same time my father had a good friend that was a Captain with the MDC Police, if you're familiar with what the MDC was, the Metropolitan District Commission. They all became State Troopers 20 years ago, maybe, something like that, but they were called the MDC. They patrolled the state land. Anyway, they got rid of the MDC and made them all State Troopers. And I had an offer from my father's friend who was a Captain in the MDC and he says, "If you want to be an MDC cop I can get you into the next class." And I turned him down. I didn't know if I was going to be good at that or not.

So, then I went off, got married, had three kids, lived in Oklahoma, lived in Florida, then came back here about 20 years ago, maybe a little bit longer, and had a good life. And I think the military helped contribute afterwards to my wellbeing, my thought process, just overall. I mean I am still a big proponent of the military and stuff like that, not that they're perfect by any means, but they're a much needed necessity.

Oh, I'll tell you one story that did happen when I came back. My father worked in the federal government office in Boston and he worked on the same floor with the Speaker of the House at the time whose name was John McCormick, and John McCormick had an office in Boston. And evidently he heard somehow that I had just come back and he wanted to meet me, and my father said, "Would you wear your uniform one more day?" Oh god. "Just for me, would you wear your uniform?" I says, "Okay."

So, I went into Boston, went up to his office. Well, it turns out the Speaker wasn't there at that time, but his assistant was, and met with him and everything. And when I left I was walking back towards where my car was parked, some college girl started taunting me, yelling at me, I mean, "You're a baby killer," all these types of things and on and on. And I'm trying to get away from her, but she followed me for about a block before she gave up. And if it was a guy I would have punched him right in the mouth and more than once. I would have beat the hell out of him, but being a girl, you don't hit girls. And so that did happen to me and that bothered me. Here I am doing something for you, I'm giving you the right for you to stand here and yell that at me, you have that right.

But I am proud of the people that are coming back today from the Middle East. They deserve a lot of credit. My son has been over there three times. He is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army. And I'm very proud of him and all the soldiers that go over there and they come back. And the atrocities they have seen and stuff like this. But you have to remember that back in the '60s, '70s, and even in the '80s returning GIs weren't welcome. Today it's all changed. And we had no welcoming, no welcome home type of stuff. And this is what has affected a lot of the guys that have mental problems since they came back, things like the incident with the girl taunting me. I believe, I truthfully believe that has contributed a lot to the PTSD that a lot of these men or women have in the military or have had after their military service. They weren't welcome home. Today, as I said, it's entirely different. We're doing much more with our veterans today than we have been in the past, and I was never ashamed to speak up and say I was proud to be in the Air Force or anything like that, even back in those days in the '70s and '80s and stuff like this.

So I'm very glad the GIs are getting their due recognition after all these years. And the atrocities that happened, stuff like this in the Middle East, we had the same things in Vietnam, same type of atrocities. And I won't say the Americans were lily white in everything, because I'm sure we weren't, but believe me a good 90% of it comes from the other side. But when my son came back he was telling me, he said things about what it's like over there, and I said, "Frankie," I

says, “when you’re standing out there in that desert you can see for 10 miles.” I said, “In Vietnam we couldn’t see for 10 feet.”

So, I don’t know what else to contribute. I think I have spoken too much. Anything else that you want to ask?

Q: No, that’s all we’ve got. Thank you very much for taking the time to do this with us. We’re really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Well thank you. Thank you for having me here. I appreciate it very much.

END OF INTERVIEW